



**AmeriCorps VISTA**

**CONCEPT PAPER INSTRUCTIONS**

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## IMPORTANT NOTICE

These Concept Paper instructions conform to AmeriCorps' online grant application system, eGrants. The eGrants system is designed to serve AmeriCorps's applicants and grantees. All AmeriCorps funding announcements are posted on our web site: [www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov) and at [www.grants.gov](http://www.grants.gov).

**Public Burden Statement:** The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 requires AmeriCorps to inform all potential persons who are to respond to this collection of information that such persons are not required to respond unless it displays a currently valid OMB control number (See 5 CFR 1320.5(b)(2)(i)).

**Time Burden:** The time required to complete this collection of information is estimated to average 10 hours per Concept Paper submission, including the time to review instructions, search existing data resources, gather the data needed, and complete and review the information collection before submitting.

**Purposes and Uses:** The information requested is collected for the purposes of reviewing project applications and granting funding requests.

**Routine Uses:** Routine uses may include disclosure of the information to federal, state, or local agencies pursuant to lawfully authorized requests. In some programs, the information may also be provided to federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to determine the existence of any prior criminal convictions. The information may also be provided to appropriate federal agencies and Department contractors who have a need to know the information for the purpose of assisting the Department's efforts to respond to a suspected or confirmed breach of the security or confidentiality or information maintained in this system of records, and where the information disclosed is relevant and unnecessary for the assistance. The information will not otherwise be disclosed to entities outside of the AmeriCorps without prior written permission.

**Effects of Nondisclosure:** The information requested is mandatory in order to receive benefits.

**Privacy Act:** Information provided for this collection may be shared with federal, state, and local agencies for law enforcement purposes.

**Universal Identifier:** When registering your organization, you are required to provide a [Unique Entity ID](#) (UEI) number and register with the federal [System for Award Management](#) (SAM). All project sponsors are required to maintain a valid registration, which must be renewed annually.

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## About AmeriCorps VISTA

Founded in 1965, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) is a federal anti-poverty national service program designed to provide resources to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to address poverty and poverty-related problems in the United States. In 1993, VISTA was incorporated into the AmeriCorps network of national service programs, housed at AmeriCorps.

AmeriCorps VISTA supports efforts to address poverty by providing opportunities for Americans, 18 years of age and older, from a diverse range of backgrounds, to dedicate a year of full-time service with a sponsoring organization (“sponsor”) on a project that will create or expand programs designed to empower individuals and communities in overcoming poverty. Members focus on capacity building activities as opposed to providing service directly to individuals.

VISTA provides a small living allowance and certain benefits directly to its members. Sponsoring organizations absorb most of the costs related to project supervision and logistical support. Investment by the sponsoring organization and the community is fundamental to the VISTA program, as the VISTA resource is intended to support efforts to achieve long-term sustainability of projects, and to strengthen local agencies and community organizations to continue carrying out the objectives of the project.

## Process for New Concept Papers

Organizations interested in becoming a VISTA sponsor should contact the AmeriCorps Regional Office responsible for their state and visit the [AmeriCorps VISTA website](#). AmeriCorps Regional Offices are staffed by federal employees. The employees conduct public outreach and program support and are directly responsible for approving and overseeing all VISTA projects within their region. **AmeriCorps Regional Offices are available to provide technical assistance.** A directory of AmeriCorps Regional Offices is available on our [website](#). AmeriCorps also recommends that you view the [technical assistance materials](#) on Performance Measurement. To apply for VISTA resources, organizations complete a two-step process:

### Step 1 – AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper

Organizations submit an AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper to AmeriCorps. The Concept Paper is a preliminary screening tool that AmeriCorps uses to evaluate whether the organization would be an appropriate sponsor.

### Step 2 – AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application

If AmeriCorps approves the Concept Paper, the organization is invited to submit an AmeriCorps VISTA Project Application based on the approved Concept Paper. AmeriCorps provides Project Application materials following approval of a Concept Paper.

## Submission in eGrants

You must submit Concept Papers electronically via the AmeriCorps web-based application system, [eGrants](#).

Contact the National Service Hotline at 800-942-2677 or [https://questions.nationalservice.gov/app/ask\\_eg](https://questions.nationalservice.gov/app/ask_eg), if a problem arises while submitting a Concept Paper. National Service Hotline hours are Monday through Thursday: 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. ET. Be prepared to provide the Concept Paper ID, organization’s name, and the NOFO to which your organization is applying.

If extenuating circumstances make the use of eGrants impossible, you should contact [vista@americorps.gov](mailto:vista@americorps.gov) for assistance.

In addition to consulting the AmeriCorps Regional Office, as directed in these instructions, you may also consult the [VISTA Campus for additional technical assistance materials](#).

## Selection Process and Criteria

AmeriCorps staff uses the following criteria to select AmeriCorps VISTA sponsors and approve both new and renewal VISTA projects.

### Criteria for Sponsorship

<b>The organization must:</b>
Be a public sector organization or a private organization designated as nonprofit by the IRS.
Have resources available for members to perform their tasks, i.e., work space, consumable supplies, access to a computer, telephone, on-the-job transportation reimbursement; and be able to provide emergency cash advances to members if needed.
Have the capacity and commitment to recruit, orient, train, supervise, and otherwise support recruited VISTA members in appropriate capacity-building roles.
Understand the concept of, and be committed to, the mission of VISTA.
Be experienced in the issues related to the beneficiaries of service and those being addressed by the proposed project.
Have the capacity to involve the beneficiary community to achieve project sustainability.
Sign a Memorandum of Agreement with AmeriCorps that outlines the legal responsibilities of both parties.

### Approval Considerations

<b>The Project Application must:</b>
Address the needs of low-income communities and otherwise comply with the provisions of the <a href="#">Domestic Volunteer Services Act Of 1973</a> , (DVSA) as amended (42 U.S.C. 4951 et seq.) applicable to VISTA and all applicable published regulations, guidelines, and AmeriCorps policies.
Show how the project will lead to building organizational and/or community capacity to continue the efforts of the antipoverty project once VISTA resources are withdrawn.
Describe how your project will achieve self-sustainability at the end of the project.
Clearly state how members will be trained, supervised, and supported to ensure the achievement of program goals and objectives.
Demonstrate that VISTA and community resources are sufficient to achieve project goals.

Indicate involvement of beneficiaries (such as an advisory group) in project development and implementation throughout the life of the project.
Demonstrate the management and technical capability of the organization to implement the project successfully.
Request an appropriate number of VISTA members to achieve the project goals; the skills and qualifications described in the application must be appropriate for the assignment(s).
Request the appropriate level of resources to achieve proposed goals and activities.
Demonstrate the project sponsor has the capacity and commitment to recruit, orient, train, supervise, and otherwise support recruited VISTA members in appropriate capacity-building roles.
Show the sponsor has the capacity to involve the beneficiary community in order to achieve project self-sufficiency.

## Concept Paper Instructions

Please use the following AmeriCorps VISTA Concept Paper instructions if you are a prospective sponsor interested in applying for AmeriCorps VISTA resources, or an existing sponsor seeking to create a new project that is substantially different in project scope or emphasis area from your current VISTA project. Note: A sponsor having more than one project is rare.

Your Concept Paper consists of the following components. Please be sure to fully address each component.

- I. Applicant Info
- II. Application Info
- III. Narratives
- IV. Review
- V. Authorize and Submit

To begin a VISTA project application, log in to your eGrants account at:

<https://egrants.cns.gov/espan/main/login.jsp>. Before starting the Applicant Info section, you will need to:

- Select “Start a New Concept Paper.”
- Select the appropriate Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). Consult your AmeriCorps Regional Office for the correct NOFO, if more than one is listed.
- Write down the system-generated Concept Paper ID number for later reference.

### I. Applicant Info

In eGrants, complete the Applicant Info section. Some information is already in the system from when you created your eGrants account. Please take the time to verify the information is correct.

- Ensure that the information under Legal Applicant Info is correct.
- In the Project Information section, select “Create a New Project”. If a value is prepopulated because your organization is a past sponsor, DO NOT SELECT THAT VALUE. You must create a new project record. The title of the proposed project will default to your organization’s name. If you wish to use a different title, you may

enter that instead. Do not use specific years in the title. The title of the project should also not be the name of a particular position. Do not overuse acronyms. This title will be used in public reports. Examples of poor project names are: 2021-2022 VISTA Project; Devon CDCU Grant Writer; and VA/DC/MD B&G Clubs.

- Enter your contact information into the fields that appear.
- Enter or select a Project Director. Choose “Project Director” from the drop-down menu next to corresponding field. This selection will open up a list of current and past eGrants users for your organization. If the person who will be the Project Director is not listed, click “Enter New” and input the new information into the fields that appear. The new name will appear in the Project Director list.
- If the project has a website, enter the website address into the Project Website URL field.
- Enter the estimated timespan of your project in years or months.
- Select one or more applicable Service Act of America Focus Areas, which are Economic Opportunity, Education, Healthy Futures, Veterans and Military Families, Disaster Services, and Environmental Stewardship. After selecting a Focus Area, select one or more of the corresponding Objectives. Select “Other” for the Focus Area if your project does not fit any of the categories. If you select “Other,” please provide a brief description in the available field. Information on the Focus Areas may be found on [AmeriCorps website](#) and the agency’s [Strategic Plan](#).
- In the “Target Population” section, select one or more of the legislated target or beneficiary populations your project intends to serve. The primary beneficiary population must be low-income individuals and/or communities.

Target Populations	
Low-income Native Americans, Native Alaskans & Pacific Islanders	Individuals and families experiencing homelessness
Low-income individuals with disabilities	Low-income formerly incarcerated youth
Low-income communities	Low-income formerly incarcerated adults
Unemployed individuals	Low-income veterans
Low-income adults	Low-income military families
Low-income youth	

## II. Application Info

In the Application Info section, enter the following information:

- List the geographic areas affected by your project. List ONLY cities/towns and/or counties and states. Do not include descriptive text of those areas. For instance, **do not enter:** We will be working in Arlington County in Virginia and Montgomery County in Maryland. Simply type: Arlington County, VA and Montgomery County, MD.
- In the Other section, the question “Are you a former grantee/sponsor?” is asking if your organization was a former VISTA sponsor or a VISTA site under another

sponsor. If yes, please enter the number of years and the total number of members assigned to your organization in the past.

- In the second set of questions in the Other section, indicate if your organization has received other resources from AmeriCorps programs, such as AmeriCorps State and National, AmeriCorps Seniors, Days of Service grants, etc. Describe these resources, including the number of members/participants **currently** supported by those resources.

### III. Narratives

The Narratives section of the Concept Paper is your opportunity to demonstrate to reviewers that your proposed project would be an appropriate use of VISTA resources. The Narratives section includes the following four items: Need, Strengthening Communities, Organizational Capacity, and Intermediary Justification. The first three items have questions that you must answer. The fourth item is only required for those organizations applying to be intermediary sponsors (see explanation below). After the Narratives, you will be asked to complete an Executive Summary following the template provided.

Be sure to:

- Include activities for the entire project period for which you are requesting resources.
- Enter data for each of the three required narrative fields in eGrants. To enter information into the field, click “View/edit narrative” next to the corresponding narrative item. Enter text into the fields that appear.
- When printed as a PDF report, your answers to the Narratives section should be no longer than 3-4 pages, single-spaced.
- Do not restate the question in your typed response.

**TIP:** You may prefer to answer questions first in a word processing document and paste them into the eGrants fields. This method provides you with an offline, backup record. Avoid using special formatting or tables; eGrants does not accommodate them. Please review your text in eGrants to make any necessary corrections to formatting or special characters, like upside-down question marks. It is also valuable to save your text in eGrants periodically, as your login can time out and cause you to lose information that has not been saved.

#### Need

In this section we want to know why you need VISTA members, as well as the need(s) they will address.

Your narrative must describe:

- The unmet poverty-related community need(s) you propose to address using AmeriCorps VISTA resources;
- The related impact on the local beneficiary community(ies) your project would serve, specifying if that includes systemically excluded racial and ethnic communities;
- Why the needs are not currently being met, and
- How your proposed project relates to the programming priorities outlined in the AmeriCorps VISTA Program Guidance of the current fiscal year. If your proposed

project does not align with the current VISTA programming priorities, justify why the project should be considered.

## **Strengthening Communities**

In this section, we want to know how your proposed VISTA project will strengthen the low-income community(ies) as opposed to strengthening your organization. Your response should include the following:

- Describe how you will ensure that the low-income community and the intended beneficiaries have involvement into your final project plan, execution of the project, and ongoing support.
- A description of how the project will be designed to build long-term sustainability in your program to ensure it continues after VISTA resources end; and
- A summary of how your project will ultimately strengthen the community and bring individuals out of poverty. This summary should include a description of how the planned program strategy (i.e., intervention) will address the poverty-related need and lead to the final planned anti-poverty outcomes. Include any evidence that suggests your approach will be successful. Evidence could include past performance, results from credible research, or results from a similar, successful program. Evidence would provide the basis for decisions about the design, frequency, and intensity of the proposed intervention.

Example: An applicant proposes to engage members to create a volunteer recruitment and management system in which recruited community volunteers will tutor third-grade students in an impoverished area in a low-performing school for an hour a day, three days per week. The applicant believes that as a result of the tutoring, the students' academic performance will improve. To support this programming approach, the applicant would describe any evidence (e.g., an independent study from a university) that the intervention (a certain set of tutoring activities delivered to a specific target population by community volunteers for one hour, three times per week) will result in improved academic performance.

## **Organizational Capability**

In this section we want to know if your organization is capable of managing federal resources. Your response should describe the following:

- Your organization's experience operating anti-poverty programming in the identified area(s) of activity. Provide examples of past work and impacts in this area;
- Your organization's plan for managing the project, to include recruiting and supervising the VISTA member(s). Explicitly include the number of members you are requesting;
- While not required, indicate whether or not your organization can contribute financially to the VISTA living allowance known as cost-sharing; and
- A description of how other staff or volunteers will be involved in the project. Please indicate what resources—including office and desk space, access to computer and phone, and other supplies—you will provide to the VISTA member(s).

## Intermediary Justification (Optional)

**Please note that very few first-time applicants become intermediary sponsors. If you are unclear whether or not you are applying as an intermediary sponsor, enter Not Applicable.** You may also wish to consider applying as a site under an existing intermediary if you do not feel your organization is established enough to sponsor its own project, or if you only need a few VISTAs. You can find a list of all existing AmeriCorps VISTA projects on the AmeriCorps.gov website by searching for “National Service Reports.”

An intermediary is a VISTA sponsoring organization that helps place VISTA members with other eligible, often small, organizations that otherwise might not have access to such resources. The intermediary is often, but not always, a larger organization that has the organizational capacity to develop and support VISTA sites across a wide geographic area or among a group of organizations that address a common need and focus area(s). The intermediary provides administrative services, technical support, training, and oversight to these organizations.

If you are proposing a intermediary project and have already identified potential sites that are separate from your own organization, respond to the following. In the full application, you will need the following information: organization/site name; address, EIN, phone number, and name of the site point of contact who will supervise the VISTA members.

- Provide information about sites and partners, if already selected; if not yet selected, describe the site application/selection process you will use. Indicate how you will ensure that selected sites are eligible to receive VISTA resources, will fit within the overall project goal(s), and address poverty-related needs as proposed.

**NOTE:** VISTA member(s) will not be placed at sites not included and approved in the Sites section of the full application.

- Describe your organization’s experience selecting and managing other nonprofits or eligible agencies to receive resources and training from your organization.
- Explain how you will monitor the sites for compliance with AmeriCorps VISTA rules and regulations as required in the Memorandum of Agreement. Explain how you will monitor and hold intermediary sites accountable for meeting program goals and providing information on members’ progress and activities as required.
- If the programmatic focus area(s) of the sites will not be the same and will not result in a single set of performance measures for the project, explain why an intermediary sponsorship is necessary. Present a compelling plan to build site capacity, both in general and as it relates to the various focus area(s).
- If your proposed sites will be required to provide funds to your organization to support the project (not your organization in general), referred to as Site Support Payments (SSPs), provide the amount(s) and their intended use(s). Such amounts are separate from any cost-share contributions your sites may make.

## Executive Summary

*Please complete this paragraph to provide the reviewer(s) a general summary of your project by replacing the bolded text with your information. You MAY NOT alter the paragraph otherwise.*

[**Organization Name**]'s mission is [**Mission Statement**]. The proposed VISTA project aligns with the [**Choose one or more AmeriCorps Focus Area**] focus area(s). The VISTA project will seek to [**enter goal(s)**] and expects to benefit [**enter type and estimated number of beneficiaries**]. [**Enter number of VISTAs**] VISTA members will contribute to the goals of the project by performing activities such as [**enter activities**] over the course of [**enter expected length of project**].

## IV. Review

The Review section lists the information entered for the three previous sections: Applicant Info, Application Info, and Narratives. Prior to submitting the Concept Paper, you can navigate to the sections to review or change what you have entered.

You can also view and print the information as a report. The report opens as an Adobe PDF read-only file. You may print the Concept Paper in PDF format or save a copy of it onto your computer. This step is useful for spotting any formatting irregularities.

Because the PDF report is a read-only file, you cannot type in the report. To make changes, you must edit in the eGrants system and run the report again for the updated version. Once you submit the Concept Paper, you may not make changes unless it is returned to you in eGrants.

## V. Authorize and Submit

eGrants requires that you verify your entire Concept Paper before submitting it, by completing the following sections in eGrants:

- Authorization
- Certification
- Submit

Read carefully the Authorization and Certification sections.

The person who authorizes the application must be the applicant organization's authorized representative, with the authority to commit resources at your organization. To complete this section, the appropriate staff person should log on to eGrants and go to the Authorize and Submit section. **The Authorized Representative must have a personal eGrants account.** To create an account and access the eGrants system, visit [www.nationalservice.gov/egrants/index.asp](http://www.nationalservice.gov/egrants/index.asp).

Check the entire application to make sure there are no errors before submitting it. When you verify the application, eGrants will also generate a list of errors if sections need to be corrected prior to submission.

**NOTE:** Submission of a concept paper does not assure receipt of AmeriCorps VISTA resources.